

PHIL MENDELSON FOR D.C. COUNCIL AT-LARGE



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DC FOR DEMOCRACY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. *Why are you running for City Council, and if (re)elected, what are the three most important things you intend to accomplish in the near term?*

We can do better as a city – our finances have become precarious, crime may be down but citizens still do not feel safe, unemployment is too high, and affordable housing remains in short supply. I have an excellent record on these issues, and ask to be re-elected to bring my record and skills to work on these problems.

I have developed expertise on public safety issues, and I am pleased that during my tenure crime has declined, but this will continue to be one of my top three priorities – to improve coordination between public safety agencies, increase programming for those incarcerated, and reduce juvenile delinquency. My second priority, in the near term, will be to support efforts to regain fiscal balance – eliminating waste, pressing agencies to spend within their budget, and reducing out-of-control borrowing (our debt service is almost ½ billion dollars annually – more than the budget for the police department). My third priority, near term, is to support initiatives that expand job opportunities for District residents (which is why I have strong support from organized labor this year).

2. *What are the three most important issues facing the District of Columbia in the next decade?*

Public safety, public education, and affordable housing.

3. *What are your qualifications to serve as Council member?*

An elected official should be responsive to citizens as well as accessible. He or she should also be thoughtful and consistent on issues (i.e., you know where he/she stands). He or she should have integrity. Finally, a representative should take positions generally in accord with what the electorate wants. My time on the Council demonstrates my qualifications on each of these points.

4. *In the context of the projected budget shortfall, do you believe the current budget discussions fairly balance increases in revenue against spending reductions, and fairly allocate the burden of revenue increases? If not, what would you propose?*

To the first question: no. I think there will need to be broad-based revenue measures such as re-bracketing the income tax to raise the rate for those earning, say, over \$250,000 annually, and possible increasing the residential real property tax by several cents. But recent action on the budget was not the right time to raise revenues because revenue estimates will likely fall again, soon, and because this Mayor has shown over and over that he'd rather spend money for politically attractive projects rather than restore financial stability.

5. The District of Columbia is suffering significantly higher unemployment than Maryland and Virginia in this recession. Describe your plan for broad-based job recovery.

There is no silver bullet solution, just the obvious: Enforce our laws requiring first source and 51% hiring of DC residents, and utilization of apprenticeship programs, primarily on construction sites. Put more emphasis on vocational training, both for adults as well as in our public schools. Focus the Department of Employment Services on job banking and matching job candidates with skills training. The long-term solution must include a better public education system.

6. If (re)elected, what will you do to create and protect affordable housing options for both homebuyers and tenants, and alleviate homelessness?

I have always supported the Housing Production Trust fund, but the funding stream must be revised to ensure stable funding. I will continue to support rent control (and related tenants' rights). I support revising "Schedule H" for income tax to provide greater relief for tenants from real property tax, and I pushed legislative measures to increase the homestead deduction and reduce real property tax rates for homeowners. I have, and will continue to, support initiatives such as inclusionary zoning to promote production (and geographical dispersion) of low income housing.

7. Do you think reform in the D.C. Public Schools is headed in the right direction? Explain your answer.

The biggest pluses (which we knew before the Mayoral takeover) are increased funding and greater Mayoral involvement/support. We didn't need to change the governance structure to achieve either. But there are significant problems. Most notably: excessive controversy (reform does not need to be confrontational), and discouragement of parental involvement. I am a DCPS parent, so I see the value of involving parents in decisions such as choosing a principal, adding or striking extracurricular programs, deciding whether to change school boundaries or restructure junior high to middle schools, etc. There needs to be a much, much greater desire to include school communities in decision making affecting their schools.

8. What policies do you recommend for reducing crime and increasing public safety in the District of Columbia.

To oversimplify: (1) greater coordination is needed between public safety agencies on issues such as truancy, violence, alternative sanctions, prisoner re-entry; (2) provide greater resources to increase case closure (e.g., expand forensic capabilities); (3) push for more aggressive prosecution; and (4) provide programming for convicts so as to reduce the rate of recidivism.

9. What are the three most important steps that need to be taken to revitalize the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority?

First, the three states and the Feds must abide by their commitment to dedicate new funding totaling \$300 million annually. Second, additional funding must be provided to meet WMATA's long term

capital needs (estimated at something like \$12 billion, reduced to something like \$4 billion under “MetroMatters,” but then not even funded at that level to ensure adequate rolling stock and system reliability). Third, the District should take steps to increase service (certainly not reduce it) and advertise these improvements to attract customers.

10. If (re)elected, what steps will you take to invigorate the D.C. statehood movement?

I support statehood. I authored legislation to change the D.C. flag and establish an income tax check-off. I wrote the elected D.C. Attorney General bill (which is a very small step in the right direction), and authored sense-of-the-council legislation early regarding the Davis bill, being clear that this would be an *incremental step*. For statehood to become a reality, we have to focus efforts on the 50 states; we will not succeed if this is a debate among District residents or only along Pennsylvania Avenue. (Also, the President needs to change his license plates.)

11. A moratorium on earmarks was declared in Fiscal Year 2010. Do you think past practices for awarding earmark grants should be reformed? If so, how?

Earmarks should be discontinued. Programs can be prioritized, but the selection of a beneficiary/contractor, and determination of an amount, should be done through established grant/contracting processes.

12. The District’s election laws do not allow the rights of minorities to be subject to popular vote. Do you nevertheless think the District’s new Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Law should be put up for popular vote? Why or why not?

The law should not be put up for popular vote. A representative legislature is elected to make decisions, not subject controversial matters to decision by plebiscite. More particularly, the rights of minorities should not be subject to popular vote. The success of our democracy has come from the expansion of civil rights despite intense opposition from the majority – women’s suffrage, race relations, marriage equality. Finally, experience has shown that popular votes over minority rights are polarizing.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to your questions.